Tom Benson, owner of New Orleans Saints and Pelicans, dies

BY TED LEWIS and RAMON ANTONIO VARGAS Advocate staff report

Tom Benson, who rose from modest beginnings in New Orleans' 7th Ward to become the owner of a billion-dollar championship sports empire, died Thursday.

The owner of the New Orleans Saints and Pelicans, Benson was 90.

Although increasingly frail, Benson had continued to attend his teams' games, including the Saints' epic charge into the 2017 NFL playoffs. He had been admitted to Ochsner Medical Center on Feb. 21 with flu-like symptoms.

Benson rose from an ordinary childhood to become Louisiana's wealthiest man, his fortune built on the sports teams, a group of 33 automobile dealerships and interests in five banks in Louisiana and Texas.

He was a rich but little-known car dealer in 1985 when he stepped in to buy the Saints, saving the franchise from relocating. Over time, he transformed the team from an NFL laughingstock into a Super Bowl champion that brought joy to a community still recovering from Hurricane Katrina.

He then saved a second New Orleans major-league sports team when he bought the NBA Hornets and renamed them the Pelicans. Benson became the only person to own two major pro franchises located in his own hometown.

"He really was 'Mr. New Orleans,' and we have no doubt Tom Benson is dancing in heaven tonight," said former President George H.W. Bush, who knew Benson from their days in Texas and attended Saints games with him.

Benson's Saints teams compiled a record of 271-256 and captured six division championships, in addition to their upset Super Bowl win over the Indianapolis Colts in 2010. His Pelicans have been less successful, with a record of 208-268, but appear poised to return to the NBA playoffs for the first time since 2015.

Those successes erased a bitter stretch in his relationship with his hometown, when Hurricane Katrina chased the Saints to San Antonio for a season and Benson talked openly about staying there rather than risking a return to a depopulated and wounded New Orleans and a badly
battered stadium.

“When we had to leave town (after Hurricane Katrina in 2005) and everybody was concerned about what was going to happen to New Orleans, getting to come back brought us together,” Benson said. “We were all so happy to be back we couldn’t believe it.

“I think people realized how much they would have missed the Saints, and it made us realize how important the Saints were to New Orleans and the region.”

Benson rebuilt the team, hiring Sean Payton as his coach and signing Drew Brees as his quarterback, and the Saints made a dramatic return to the still-shattered city in September 2006 with an emotional victory over the Atlanta Falcons. The Saints unexpectedly advanced to the NFC championship game that season.

Four years later, the team captured New Orleans’ only Super Bowl championship, beating the Colts 31-17 with the aid of one of the riskiest plays in the history of the NFL’s biggest game: an onside kick at the start of the second half. Benson said later that his coaches had not informed him of the trick play.

Last season, after three consecutive 7-9 finishes, the Saints made a flurry of successful offseason moves and enjoyed another resurgence, going 11-5 in the regular season behind Brees and a bevy of talented young players. They were one play away from returning to the NFC championship game but lost at Minnesota 29-24.

“Winning covers a lot of other things,” said Bobby Hebert, the Saints quarterback during Benson’s early ownership years and now a member of the team’s radio broadcast team. “All of a sudden, people weren’t just glad to be back in New Orleans, but we were winning, and as (an) owner, Mr. Benson was getting his share of the credit for it.

“Nothing could have done more for his image.”

Astute advice

And credit, too, an astute piece of spousal advice.

Amid talk that the Saints were considering a permanent move to San Antonio after Katrina in 2005, Gayle Benson, whom Tom had married the year before, stepped in.

“It was so hard on him,” she said. “I told him, ‘You are allowing the
media to put you in the worst possible light. Just start smiling and waving and being polite. Show that you’ve got nothing to hide and that you’re doing the right thing, and people will love you.’"

Benson later said it was the best advice he ever received.

“It was great because it sure worked,” he said. “I think it taught everybody a good lesson. That also shows you how much Gayle has meant to me — more than you would ever believe.”

That could also serve as an insight into why Gayle Benson — not his daughter or grandchildren — is poised to assume control of the Saints and Pelicans franchises. Benson announced in early 2015 that he was dropping his daughter, Renee Benson, and grandchildren, Rita and Ryan LeBlanc, from his succession plans, setting off a series of court battles.

Benson’s standing among local fans improved even more during the Saints’ darkest moment since Katrina — the pay-for-hits scandal in 2012 that resulted in the yearlong suspension of Payton plus shorter ones for General Manager Mickey Loomis, two assistants and four players.

Benson did not fire Payton and Loomis, as many of his fellow owners reportedly felt he should have done.

In the end, Benson not only brought back Loomis and Payton, he signed Payton to a contract extension that made him among the highest-paid coaches in the NFL.

“His support was amazing,” Payton said. “It was the No. 1 thing that kept me going while I was away from the building.

“Despite all of the b.s. that was going on, he was 100 percent behind us. A good leader is someone who can tune out the noise and make the decision he feels is right.”

In recent years, Benson made other moves that won him admiration. He made a number of substantial philanthropic donations, including $5 million to Steve Gleason’s Team Gleason Foundation and an $11 million donation to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Benson has been particularly involved in Catholic charities and related endeavors. In 2012, Pope Benedict XVI bestowed on him the Pro Ecclesia et Pontifrice, the highest papal award given to any lay person.
“When you get a little older and you’ve been blessed in life, you realize that it’s time to start sharing,” Benson said. “It wasn’t anything that was planned, but it just fell in place as we went along.”

On the sports side of things, Benson’s donations to Tulane, Incarnate Word University in San Antonio and the Pro Football Hall of Fame resulted in Benson’s name being attached to three football fields.

Benson was inducted into the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame in 2014, and later that year, a statue of Benson holding the Vince Lombardi Trophy was unveiled on the plaza outside the Superdome.

But make no mistake: Benson remained highly motivated by the business of business. He was a person who would much rather talk about spreadsheets than spread formations.

A lifetime of success

Benson was born July 12, 1927, and grew up in the grip of the Great Depression.

His own athletic career ended after a failed attempt at freshman basketball at St. Aloysius High. Later in life, he thought activities like golf and tennis took too much time away from business.

Benson’s initial wealth was built outside of sports.

He used his acumen for finance to acquire his first auto dealership in 1963, eventually growing his empire to 33 dealerships and interest in five banks.

His first dealership was Tom Benson Chevrolet of San Antonio in 1962, and his interests included banking and land deals, primarily in the San Antonio area.

In later years, Benson also entered into the thoroughbred business, and two of his initial purchases, Mo Tom and Tom’s Ready, made the 2016 Kentucky Derby.

Additionally, Benson purchased (and later sold) WVUE-TV, and in 2012, when the Times-Picayune announced it was trimming its print publication from seven days to three, Benson made an offer to buy the newspaper and maintain it as a daily, but its New York-based owners rejected him.
Benson professed not to know or even care much about sports when he led a group of investors who purchased the Saints from their feckless original owner, John Mecom, in 1985 for $70 million. He put together a group of investors with himself as the principal owner, although he held only a 31-percent stake at first, just above the minimum the league required for ownership.

At the time, it looked like the team might relocate to Jacksonville, Florida. Benson’s purchase made him a hometown hero, and by 1992 he had bought out the other investors.

His popularity would wax and wane over the next two decades, largely depending on how well the Saints were doing and how aggressively Benson was seeking help from Louisiana taxpayers, either in the form of a new stadium or else generous subsidies.

Benson eventually contented himself with a series of renovations to the Superdome. His leases with the state for the Superdome, Smoothie King Center and Benson Tower office building, which guarantee the teams will remain in Louisiana until at least 2025, will bring him nearly $400 million in revenue.

Still, Benson’s early reputation for tough negotiations didn’t seem to apply to his teams in later years.

“No matter what we need to be successful, Mr. Benson has given it to us,” Brees said. “Not all owners are like that.”

Gayle Benson said success was every bit as meaningful to her husband — only in a slightly different way — in later years as it was back in the heady “Benson boogie” days of the late 1980s, when the Saints reached the playoffs for the first time.

She said that in later years her husband realized how much passion local fans had for his teams.

“It’s really about those people,” she said in 2014. "A lot will spend their last few dollars just to go to the games, and it means so much to him for them to get to see the team winning.”

At the height of Benson’s popularity, with the Super Bowl victory still a fresh memory, the owner moved for a second time to save a professional sports franchise for his hometown when he bought the NBA's Hornets in 2012.

Dennis Lauscha, president of the Saints and Pelicans, noted there was
considerable consternation about the viability of the team in New Orleans, especially because previous owner George Shinn had been forced to relinquish the franchise to the NBA.

“We walked away and then came back on this so many times we called it ‘Lazarus,’ ” Lauscha said. “But Mr. Benson kept telling us we had to find a way to make it work.

“He felt one of the worst things for the community in the post-Katrina era was to let the team leave. He also knew that it would be tough to get the focus on basketball in a football community, but he was relentless about it.”

Personal tragedies

While Benson enjoyed financial success beyond anyone's wildest dreams, his family life was marred by personal tragedy.

Widowed twice, he also saw two of his seven children die at early ages.

The 1986 death from cancer of his son, Robert, who managed the family ranch in Johnson City, Texas, was particularly hard to take.

“I just about lost interest in everything back then,” Benson said.

Of his surviving children, only daughter Renee, who oversaw his Texas banking interests, became part of the Saints/Pelicans ownership. That, too, changed with the 2015 announcement that third wife Gayle would take over the two sports franchises upon his death.

The announcement in favor of Gayle provoked a falling-out with Renee and her children, Rita and Ryan, which Benson publicly said pained him.

Among his jilted relatives' reactions was to file a lawsuit questioning whether he was still mentally competent to handle his own affairs.

Benson defended himself and triumphed in that case, but he reached settlements in a pair of other legal battles related to the family feud. One of those settlements involved his surrendering control of car dealerships and a family hunting ranch in Texas to Renee and her children, all of whom had spent countless holidays with him at that ranch before they were fired from their jobs as executives for Benson.

As for his health, Benson had heart surgery and overcame kidney cancer
along with recent knee surgery, which forced him to use a walker.

In 2014, after making his part of the New Orleans presentation seeking to host Super Bowl LII in 2018, Benson suffered a fall. He delayed going to the emergency room for what turned out to be an overnight stay until the final vote was taken and Minneapolis won out.

The fall, along with Benson’s advancing years, led to speculation about how long he would remain active in team affairs.

While he conceded then that he had thoughts about his mortality, he also found himself in a good place.

“We’re very happy with life,” he said. “I have a great family, and I’ve been able to enjoy that.

“The early years of my life were rough, but as I got older, they calmed down a little bit. God has been very good to me.”

Joel A. Erickson and Nick Underhill contributed to this report.